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Abstract

This study is based on psychoanalytic insights, notably Lacan's, into the relation between symbolic language and the Real; also on the writings of Ignace Meyerson and Paul Ricoeur's reflections, after Freud, on artworks as fictional resolutions which offer a particular kind of understanding. Art, then, in its broadest definition, as performative.

In this light, I look back at the ambiguities already present in the terms used by Cristoforo Landino and other Renaissance proto-art criticism: both in the mimetic 'symmetry' between art and its objects in the world, but also 'wit', 'liveliness' and 'fantasy' in the artists look of painting and sculpture. There is a further questioning of the mimetic relation between art and nature with Romanticism: Humboldt's 'energeia' applied to the artwork and its characterising as 'intransitive' in Todorov's historical survey of the symbolic. I would then look at the 20th century's legacy of a variety of artmaking strategies, from the highly rhetorical to an embracing of the Real, jettisoning mimetic realism.

My overall argument is (1) that art has its own tropes and rhetorics and this includes the highly mimetic realism of the Renaissance to the 19th century; (2) that many 20th century artworks seem, either through layers of rhetoric or through introducing the Real, to suspend the resolution we associate with art; (3) which raises the question, in what sense might we call for more of the Real insofar as this seems to negate a major function of art? Or is lack of resolution, and a stress on the fictionality of rhetorics, precisely a valuable kind of understanding of our world?

Background

This paper was originally presented at the conference on the State of the Real, at Glasgow School of Art, 1st November, 2003. This conference debated the subject of "the real" in aesthetic philosophy, criticism and practice. Keynote speakers included Prof. Linda Nochlin, New York University and Prof. Slavoj Žižek, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Work shown with the paper includes Portrait of a Young Man by Titian, Market Day, Copenhagen (1890) by Paul Fischer; Eva Hesse and Lili Dujourie, a sequence from Fellini's Interview, an extract from JLG by JLG, Alan Sekula and paintings by Luc Tuymans.



Market Day, Copenhagen (1890) by Paul Fischer.

Introduction

This study proposes that the most general character of art, historically, is performative and that what it performs is a fictional resolution. To this end I bring together terms and proposals from a number of disciplines to look at questions surrounding perception, cognition and evaluation. I then raise questions of resolution in more recent art practices.

The starting point is psychoanalysis' challenge to a mimetic model of representation; the problematising of the relation between symbolic language and the Real. I look in particular at the reflections, after Freud and others, of Paul Ricoeur and Ignace Meyerson on the nature and function of art, which brings perception and pleasure into the consideration of artmaking. I then look briefly at the ambiguity of the terms in renaissance proto-art criticism as the writers respond to the new realistic look of sculpture and painting. Then I turn to the use of the highly rhetorical and/or embracing of the Real in some 20th. century art practices.

Art as performative

For Freud, three areas comparable to mentally ill states were dreams, including daydreaming, jokes and art. Paul Ricoeur, in his essay on Freud, showed how considering one or another of these helped Freud theorise the pleasure and reality principles and their part in producing and maintaining an identity [1]

Maintaining an identity is dependent on an ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality in order to adequately negotiate the Real. This negotiation is always a work in progress given the open-ended nature of experience. Art is a special resource to us because it offers a resolution, via pleasure, which complies with the necessary distinction between fantasy and reality. Thus in the section 'The analogy of the work of art' Ricoeur comments:

'[The] general conception of aesthetic pleasure as detonator of deep discharges constitutes the most daring insight in the whole of psychoanalytic aesthetics. The connection between technique and the hedonistic can be taken as the guiding thread in the most incisive researches of Freud and his school.' [2]

To take this further I want to turn to the thinking of Ignace Myerson and his book *Les fonctions psychologiques et les oeuvres*. 'Oeuvres' here might be translated as 'cultural works' as they include language itself and religious practices as well as art. Meyerson was part of a group of researchers working in psychology but feeding in anthropology and semiology, including Mauss and Saussure [3]. His work is very much about the active, transformative nature of cultural tools. Thus in the case of religion there is an 'originary event' 'connected to a remarkable personality' which is both 'singular' but also invested to become 'significant, exemplary and indefinitely renewable. The regulation of our conduct, of our feelings, of our thoughts is centred on this possibility: the repetition - at once commemorative, symbolic and real - of the initial divine act.' [4]

This is interesting alongside Ricoeur because Meyerson underlines both the fictional nature of a cultural construct but also the performative resolution it effects for its adherents who bring belief to it - which relies on the elision of the performative role of the practice itself. Again, what is specific to art is that we can enjoy its resolution while accepting its fictional status. To return to Ricoeur, we enjoy a perceptual coherence, not just a shape and form but also the prompts to understanding. This then seems to prime a deeper satisfaction, albeit temporarily, bound up with the pleasure and reality principles.

A more general reflection would be useful here for what I want to say about the implications of mass media below. Cognitive psychology does seem to straddle an empirical remit and territory more familiar from anthropology and psychoanalysis:

‘Analysis of skilled sequential behaviours (whether they be maze learning [...]) all suggest the existence of guiding structures: of “expectations”, “cognitive maps”, or “deep structures”. From such cognitive structures quite different specific detailed response sequences may be generated [...] most or all visual perception also involves highly skilled sequential purposive behaviours, and some large component of the perceptual process in the adult is best understood in terms of the “expectations” and “maps” that underlie these skilled behaviours.’ [5]

It seems to me that a notion like ‘purposeful’ leads us into a murky area where cognition and evaluation overlap. This raises the question of whether cognition is ever completely free of cultural doxa. With advances in the neurosciences, debates continue about the relation between the visula-perceptual and meaning. In an issue of *Sciences et avenir* devoted to the unconscious, Bernard Lechevalier discusses a ‘cognitive unconscious’ which performs a kind of pre-editing or probable expectation of the significance of an encounter with something in the work [6]. As his article exemplifies, it will be interesting how researchers check what they find against, in his case, Bergson and Freud as well as earlier experiments in cognitive psychology; the dynamics between an economy of pleasure, examined decisions and convictions based on cultural or institutional prejudice.

Con ingegno

A brief excursion to 15th century Italy where Plato’s vocabulary of mimesis re-emerged as a kind of institutional explanatory framework for evaluating the new realistic sculpture and painting. I am indebted here to a close reading of Cristoforo Landino by Ottavio Morisoni [7]. Landino indeed relies on mimetic terms when he says that artists had rediscovered the ‘vera proporzione la quale e greci chiamano symetria’. But, as Morisoni notes, this terminology and frame of thinking were modified from being ‘absolute’ by other comments: ‘le figure ne’ ‘superiore pictori morte fece vivie et di vari gesti’; and on Donatello the phrases ‘con grande vivacita’ and the way the figures appear to be in ‘motu’. Morisoni notes that Landino

here is not commenting on 'a literal meaning' but on the fact that 'the movement is deeply affected by and dependent on the nature of Bas-relief carving'. The writer Filippo Villani is also pushing towards new terms. In his appreciation of Cimabue he says the painter resurrected 'antica pittura' 'con arte e con ingegno'.

My point here is that the high-finish realism which lasted into the 19th. century is a seductive advert for the explanatory authority of mimesis. But the proto-critics were already articulating another approach: the artist uses cleverness and artifice; the artwork is a mediator of the Real.

I will briefly mention here Todorov's survey of the further weakening of the mimetic model with Romantic philosophy [8]. This would include his discussion of Moritz' 'mimesis in the sense of poiesis', that is, making. Similarly Humboldt's 'energeia', a work which aims to achieve through the power of its construction [9].

Understanding and action

Representation and the Real have had to be re-explored in 20th. century art practices. Earlier reasons included the accelerating facts of modernity for which Freud's theories were a part. An inescapable current reason is the penetration of communications technologies into our imaginative life.

The strategies in art which interest me here are those which employ highly rhetorical layers of technique and reference and those which try to embrace the Real as it were beyond available language. An example of the latter would be the unlikely materials used by Eva Hesse. Partly comparable, the velvet-drape wall-pieces of Lili Dujourie seem to use a familiar language but also block it, not least through her titles. The effect is to take us back a stage in the process of cognition dealing with perception. The results might be a sense of play and possibilities or anxiety or both; one might think of Deleuze's term the 'compossible'.

I think taking us back a stage from resolution could also stand as a description of the effect of using layers of, in principle, recognisable techniques and references whilst leaving them on the point of unravelling, individually and collectively. In the opening sequence of Fellini's *Intervista* the director as himself gives a brief reply to a Japanese interviewer. It is a dream where he is in a dark room feeling along the walls then manages to fly. He is high over clouds that begin to part and he sees, and we see, a large area of modernist concrete sheds. He asks himself in the dream a series of questions of what he is seeing, including is it a nuclear shelter? Then, the view getting clearer, he recognises it as Cinecittà. End of dream, then he tells the interviewer and film-crew to go see his assistant "who knows more than I do". Just before the interviewer asked Fellini her first question, we see dogs running playfully into the shot, and as Fellini begins his reply we see dramatically lit gantries and the hardware of film-making. In this brief sequence we are shown the

business of making; placed in the process between perception and cognition as well as given, with the dogs, what one might call the indiscreet Real. Serge Daney, considering a sequence in Fellini's *Ginger and Fred*, remarks that Fellini is 'above all a great realist'. He goes on:

'Without him we might definitively forget what it looks like, Rome and its traffic jams, rain on advertising hoardings, a hotel stuck up anywhere... This is not a vision, it is things which we practically don't see anymore in films and never on TV.' [10]

The sound of dogs, as well as seagulls, recurs during Godard's *JLG by JLG*, a work of/about autobiography. Dogs bark near the beginning over an outside shot of a French window of his house. Before we had a photo of him as a boy with Godard's voiceover in a gravelly bass, 'Usually it begins like this...' We then see ruled pages turning with written aphorisms or historical references followed by a low shot of waves and ducks by the shore of Lake Geneva, with or without his bass commentary. The density of the layers is as compelling as an orchestral score but its effect is to suspend a clear resolution of its parts.

There is a generic Godard comment quoted by Jaques Aumont in his study of *Histoire(s) du cinema*: 'Cinema can show work, not hearts'. [11] I take work here to mean the transformation by industrial and scientific processes to produce commodities including symbolic and informational ones. In a way the comment is a pragmatic update of cinema's work prophesied in 1924 by D.W.Griffiths:

'In the year 2024 the most important single thing which the cinema will have helped in a large way to accomplish will be that of eliminating from the face of this civilised world all armed conflict [...] With the use of the universal language of moving pictures the true meaning of the brotherhood of man will have been established throughout the earth.' [12]

For many artists, producing an understanding inevitably includes the business of making, hence showing the limits of their own rhetorics and by implication those of the media. The 'infotainment' environment we had an inkling about with pop art now appears to many in a less playful, more ambiguous light [13]. It is not clear that advances in communications technologies equal more liberal access to knowledge and the ability to act on it. Have you heard, for instance, of Doff? It stands for the digital oil field of the future which

'brings together a panoply of information and control technologies, remote sensing mechanisms, "intelligent drilling", and highly accurate measurement tools to make exploration and production far more exact and targeted. [...] That is still in the future.' [14]

More to the point, have you heard it referred to in TV debates about the Iraq war, given it 'could expand world oil resources by 125bn barrels – more than the entire currently proven reserves of Iraq.'? Talking about a current affairs programme report on the french army in Iraq for the first war, Serge Daney

comments:

‘When the report is over, it’s necessary to make a small effort to dare make this awful confession to oneself: that didn’t have any information. [...] The only info is that TV went there (and not us).’ [15]

Alan Sekula’s photo-projects attempt to show what isn’t shown by as it were rewinding the effacement of work. Serially piecing together what things actually look like through transformation he questions the having-been classified end-products we ‘recognise’. He exposes capitalist modernity’s ‘natural’ reach into the future [16]. Luc Tuymans’ paintings have a kind of reverse strategy, referencing the photographic as only possible documents of the actual. The latter is is often removed a stage further where the photo had itself recorded something already placed within a cultural typology. A recent example is the series ‘Exhibits’, images of monkeys in sexual acts from photos taken in a Japanese diorama. Ulrich Loock comments on his work:

‘The illness of the painting is it overlooks reality: the picture is constructed as a trauma.’ [17]

It seems as if the most up-to-date technologies for understanding the world betray their very possibilities, at least when they assume a mass form. Jan Thorn Prikker on Tuymans:

‘We can only look at all of this because we don’t comprehend anything. [...] We are... blind people who are shown everything so that they no longer understand anything. [...] We are completely informed observers of the chronicle of ongoing crimes.’ [18]

Or John Rajchman:

‘Thus there arises a new enemy of thought, more insolent and self-assured than those of the last century - a communicational stupidity, to which corresponds a new form of power which Deleuze proposed to call “control”.’ [19]

Insofar as the mass technologies which transmit information also operate on a symbolic and evaluative level, there is a serious question for democracy within capitalism. One would think that there is shared deconstructive ground for response here between artists and others who want to imagine and bring about ‘another world’, slogan of the NGOs making up the World Social Forum. [20]

A way of phrasing what is at stake might be, are evolving technologies going to provoke something like a positive epistemological shift or be restricted to another layer of symbolic fracture?



Portrait of a Young Man by Titian.

Notes

1. De l'interpretation, essai sur Freud, Paris 1965.
2. Ibid. pp. 165-177.
3. Les fonctions psychologiques et les oeuvres, Paris 1948. This was his only book but for his extensive published articles see <http://lancelot.univ-paris12.fr/meyerson/i-meyerson-bibliogrde.htm>. 42 articles were collected with a preface by Jean-Pierre Vernant in *Ecrits 1920-82*, Paris 1987. Meyerson's colleagues included George Dumas and Henri Delacroix.
4. Ibid. p.55.
5. Julian Hochberg, 'The Representation of Things and People' in *Art, Perception and Reality* ed. Maurice Mandelbaum, Baltimore 1972 p.63. See also note 20.
6. 'Inconscient et neurone' in *Sciences et Avenir* n.127 Jul/Aug 2001 pp.24-9. Emotion, memory and meaning are the subjects of Antonio Damasio's, *Spinoza avait raison*, Paris 2003, reviewed in *Le Monde* 11/6/03 pp.25 and 30.
7. 'Art Historians and Art Critics - 111 Cristoforo Landino' in *The Burlington Magazine* n.95 May 1953 pp.267-70. See also the overview with extensive bibliography by Johannes Bartuschat, *Chroniques Italiennes*, Edition Web n.72 (1/2003) <http://www.nuiv-paris3.fr/recherche/chroniquesitaliennes/>
8. *Theories du symbole*, Paris 1977 pp.185ff
9. Meyerson also discusses Humboldt, in the same paragraph as Cassirer. We follow Meyerson's insights from anthropology and linguistics as he re-models the Romantic debate: *op.cit.* pp.37-8
10. *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs a main, cinema, television, information*, Lyon 1991 p.78.
11. *Amnesies, Fictions du cinema d'apres Jean-Luc Godard*, Paris 1999 p.23. *Histoire(s) du cinema* is one of the subjects in Jacques Ranciere's *Le destin des images*, Paris 2003, reviewed in *Le Monde des Livres* p.VI, *Le Monde* 14/11/03.
12. 'The movies 100 years from now' in *Film makers on Film Making* ed. Henry M. Geduld, London 1967 p.61.
13. The term is Hubert Schiller's, author of *Information Inequality and Culture Inc.*
14. Daniel Yergin, 'Whose oil is it anyway?', *Financial Times Weekend* 22/3/03 p.3.
15. *op.cit.* p.172.
16. cf. consumerism's 'nominalism' for Frederic Jameson, 'Fear and Loathing in globalization', *New Left Review* 23 Sept/Oct 2003 pp.105-114.